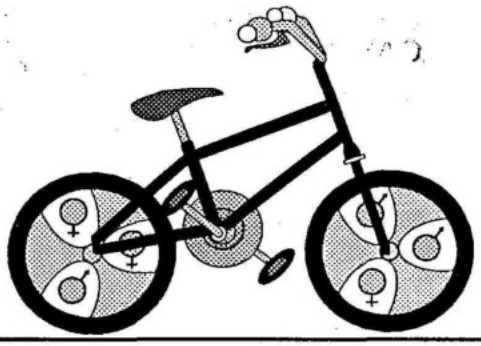

OBN NEWS

December 1990

OBN News, 519 Church Street, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2C9 Tel: (416)-649-1356 / Fax: (416)-649-1314

The Ontario Bisexual Network (OBN) is a group formed to enable contacts among bisexual people in Ontario, and to help them undertake activities of interest. At present, these activities include: a mailing list, a newsletter, support group meetings, social activities, a political action group, education of others, information sharing, and safe sexuality information. The network's only mandate is to bring people together. — OBN Meeting, August 2, 1990.

The Myth of Sexual Orientation

By Les Green

Do people have sexual orientations in the way that they have blood-types? Do labels like 'bi', 'gay' or 'straight' help us understand our sexuality? I'd like to point out three problems with the ordinary notion of sexual orientation, and suggest why these labels are not as helpful as some think.

1. The Continuum

Kinsey's famous studies showed that many people are neither exclusively heterosexual nor homosexual in their behaviour, that there are all shades of erotic preference inbetween. Now, that obviously makes it hard to draw lines between gay and bi, for example. But there is another problem too. Kinsey's scale presents sexuality as if the more one is attracted to the opposite gender, the less one must be attracted to the same gender.

Many bi people know that is wrong. Erotic preferences do not always crowd each other out, though lifestyles often do. To the extent that the familiar labels are part of such lifestyles they may therefore misrepresent variations in sexuality.

2. Complexity

The second problem is that people vary not just in partner choice, but in other ways too. Some men who identify as straight have occasional, or even regular, sex with other men: their identity and behaviour differ. The same is true of social roles: some gays and many bi's are heterosexually married and lead fairly straight lifestyles. And, of course, actual partner choice, personal identity, and social role can all differ from a person's erotic fantasies.

This makes for a great deal of complexity. The ordinary notion of sexual orientation assumes that somehow it must all add up to an over-all picture so that everyone is either gay, straight, or bi. But these different dimensions can't really be added together. So how do we end up with over-all labels?

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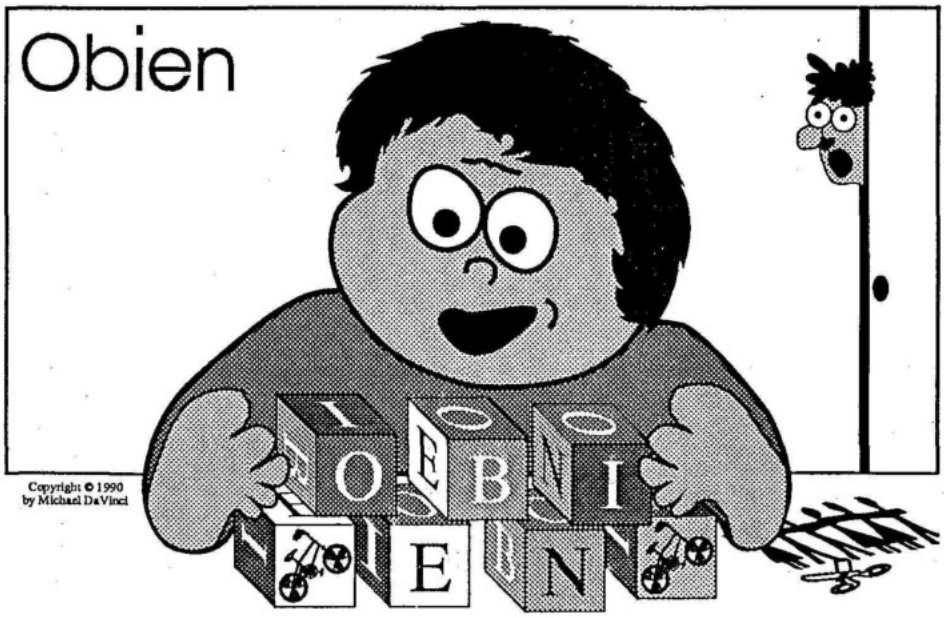

"Daddy — I'm gonna marry Bobby and Nancy when I grow up!"

Meeting Times

Meetings are held on the first Thursday of every month, from 6 to 8 p.m., and on the third Thursday of every month from 8 to 10 p.m., at the 519 Community Center. (519 Church Street, just north of Wellesley.) You may have your name and address added to our mailing list at any meeting, or by writing to OBN, c/o 519 Church Street, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2C9.

Who to Contact

The following is a list of OBN members who have volunteered their time to talk with you about questions you may have, or if you just need someone for emotional support:

Bill Jeffery (416) 922-4262
Bruce Small · (416) 649-1356
Carol Broderick (416) 766-7011
Catherine Crocket (416) 537-5832
Les Green (416) 968-6955
Scott Lucas (416) 633-5666

CANADIAN GAY ARCHIVES

Myth of Sexual Orientation

(continued from page 1)

Well, in attempting to simplify things, some psychologists and sociologists suggest that one dimension is the most or only important one. Behaviourists, for instance, focus on what we do; psychoanalysts on our fantasies. For instance, Robert Isay in his excellent book, *On Being Homosexual*, writes, "I have found sexual fantasy to be a more clinically useful way of defining homosexuality than behaviour. . . . some gay men may not express their homoerotic impulses because of internal conflict, social bias, or personal choice."

But the notion that only one's fantasy life is real is surely wrong. Fantasy is indeed free from the oppression of a homophobic culture; but it is also free of other, more healthy, reality checks. There is no reason to think that fantasies that would be unpleasant if acted out somehow reveal true self.

Of course, instead of eliminating some dimensions of our sexuality, we might just leave it as it is and allow for hundreds of combinations of 'orientations'. That would be fine, but it is not what the actual labels 'bi', 'gay' and 'straight' convey, and it is too late to retrieve them.

3. Change

Most difficult to reconcile with the standard view is the fact that sexuality may change, sometimes dramatically, over a lifetime. Gays and lesbians usually interpret this through the notion of 'coming out'. They see it as a matter of finding a true self that was always there, though repressed. Once they identify as gay, they may even re-read their life history as if it had always been heading in one direction. They discover early feelings of difference; they reinterpret their early family experiences in ways consistent with their own (or sometimes even their therapist's) views about the origins of sexual preference.

In fact, 'coming out' is a complex process that does not always have a built-in direction. Changes in sexuality do not themselves show that one's earlier preferences were somehow phoney. They may simply be changes. Realizing that, some say we should instead focus on momentary events. George Weinberg, in *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, writes, "One may be homosexual for a minute, an hour a day, or a lifetime. . . . Kinsey used his scale to classify people by their behaviour over a lifetime, but when people talk about themselves it makes perfect sense to think about one's recent past or present desires."

This does indeed make sense, but not as a conception of sexual orientation. Is a man who has sex with a man in the morning and with a woman in the afternoon a homosexual in the morning and a heterosexual in the afternoon? Is a woman who had exclusive erotic attraction to men for the first thirty-five years of life, followed by a thirty-five year period of exclusive attraction to women, *bisexual*, or did she change from straight to lesbian? Do these questions matter or make sense?

I'm not sure they do. After we know about someone's experiences, desires, and hopes I don't think there is any further, deep fact about them, such as whether they are bi, gay or straight. All there is is the way they are.

4. So What?

For those three reasons, sexuality is much more complicated than the ordinary notion of sexual orientation allows. It isn't just that in addition to gays and straights, there are also bi's. It is that each of these categories is artificial and conceals a lot of variation within it.

These labels are held together, not by good theory, but by their function in maintaining ways of life. That is pehaps the most productive use to which the label 'bi' may now be put: as a focal point for the attempt to win some public space for people whose sexuality includes or has included attraction to both genders.

But labels have also been used for social control. Even if it is a myth that everyone has a sexual orientation, it is no myth that people are oppressed because of their perceived orientations. After all, there do not need to be any witches in order for people to be punished for witchcraft. And in response to oppression we sometimes apply labels defensively to ourselves.

It might be helpful for people, especially bi's, to think about the value of labels, but not get too anxious about which one applies to them. But let us also remember that the struggle for sexual freedom can go a long way without labels of any kind.

SAFER SEX TIPS

You can be HIV-positive and not know it. Your sex partner can be HIV-positive and not know it. But anyone who is HIV-positive can give the virus to anyone else. — AIDS Committee of Toronto

When you test anonymously, no one will know your test result, unless you decide to tell them. So there is no danger that you will face discrimination because you came in for testing or because you tested positive. Another good reason is that you may be able to talk more openly to the counsellor about your sexual or other risk history if you know your name is not recorded. Anonymous testing makes it easier for people at risk to get tested as soon as possible. This means faster access to testing and treatment.

— Hassle Free Clinic, Toronto

Hassle Free Clinic at 556 Church Street in Toronto will do anonymous testing for HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). For women's services call (416)-922-0566; for men's services call (416)-922-0603. An appointment is necessary for HIV testing.

(OBN has a Safer Sex Committee. We are eager to get feedback, useful tips, questions, and new information. Write to OBN at the address on page 1 of the

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